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RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 5350  
RUEHLP/AMEMBASSY LA PAZ PRIORITY 1860  
RUEHPE/AMEMBASSY LIMA PRIORITY 0066  
RUEHMU/AMEMBASSY MANAGUA PRIORITY 1114  
RUEHME/AMEMBASSY MEXICO PRIORITY 3664  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 0645  
RUEHQT/AMEMBASSY QUITO PRIORITY 1935  
RUEHSG/AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO PRIORITY 3411  
RUEHDG/AMEMBASSY SANTO DOMINGO PRIORITY 0102  
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE PRIORITY 0900  
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0072  
RUEHMI/USOFFICE FRC FT LAUDERDALE PRIORITY 2963  
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHUB/USINT HAVANA PRIORITY 0612

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000911

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: CHAVEZ'S MEDIA WAR WAGES ON

REF: A. CARACAS 717

[1](#)B. CARACAS 664

[1](#)C. CARACAS 663

[1](#)D. CARACAS 191

CARACAS 00000911 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Robert Downes, Political Counselor,  
for Reason 1.4(b).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) The first quarter of this year saw another BRV offensive against the media -- one of the few remaining independent democratic institutions in Venezuela. The BRV launched a new series of high profile legal attacks targeting members of the opposition press, a Caracas court ruled in favor of press censorship on the highly political case of assassinated prosecutor Danilo Anderson, and President Chavez appointed outspoken MVR "attack dog" William Lara as his Communications Minister. In mid-March, the BRV crossed a red line it had not previously crossed, and temporarily imprisoned two journalists. Gustavo Azocar, a Tachira state journalist who questioned the qualifications of a judge involved on a highly sensitive political case, was imprisoned March 7 pending trial for allegedly failing to appear at court dates. One week later on March 13, a Caracas court issued an arrest warrant for El Nacional columnist Ibeyise Pacheco who was found guilty of defamation in 2005 and punished with nine months of house arrest. Both journalists were released almost immediately following an international outcry, which RCTV head Marcel Granier (protect) told emboffs included private calls to President Chavez from both Brazilian President Lula and Argentinean President Kirchner. The arrests were out of character for a regime which is hyper-sensitive to its image abroad and may have been a BRV trial balloon to gauge international reaction. Globovision head Alberto Ravell (protect) told emboffs that the second in

command of the Cuban embassy in Caracas was involved, and participated on the decision-making around the timing of both journalistsQ, releases. Media leaders post spoke with after the arrests say they expect the BRV to revert to more subtle legal and economic intimidation tactics until after the December 2006 presidential elections, but did not rule out future arrests. End summary.

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International Community Condemns Arrests  
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12. (C) The international community's response to the arrests of Gustavo Azocar and Ibeyise Pacheco was stronger and more immediate than its reaction to previous Venezuelan media claims of BRV legal and economic intimidation. Within days after the arrests, the level of discourse on Venezuelan press freedom had leapt from media watchdog groups which typically comment on Venezuelan press freedom issues to international organizations and governments, which had not previously paid much public attention to the state of Venezuelan freedom of expression. Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) President Evelio Fernandez expressed concern over the BRV's criminalization of opinion March 17, and cited the case of Ibeyise Pacheco as an example. His comments came two days after the IACHR named Venezuelan lawyer Ignacio Alvarez as its special rapporteur on the freedom of expression. The Inter-American Press Society report released at the conclusion of its bi-annual conference March 18 stated that "Venezuela has passed a dangerous tangle of legislation designed to limit freedom of expression." RCTV head Marcel Granier told emboffs March 27 that both Brazilian President Lula and Argentinean President Kirchner had privately placed calls to President Chavez about the arrests. As the head of the Venezuelan Institute for Press and Society Ewald Scharfenberg told emboffs March 30, Venezuelan press freedom

CARACAS 00000911 002.2 OF 003

issues often seem trivial to international audiences accustomed to bodycounts -- the arrests of Azocar and Pacheco triggered a stronger reaction because the situation was instantly intuitive to international audiences.

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Chavez Orders Journalists' Release  
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13. (C) On March 21, approximately one week after Pacheco's detention, President Chavez publicly called upon his supporters to be more restrained in the face of perceived press insults. He declared that "many journalists are looking to be arrested because they want to say we are attacking freedom of expression here" and told his followers to "let the dogs bark." Several hours later, Pacheco's accuser, military colonel Angel Bellorin, dropped his complaint against her. Upon regaining her freedom later that day, Pacheco told the press she did not believe her pardon was coincidental. As for the case of Gustavo Azocar, a newly energized state prosecutor appealed his detention March 20 and Azocar was released from prison on March 23. The timing of the releases, which in one case closely followed the President's remarks and in the other actually anticipated them by a day, indicates a high-level of BRV coordination and involvement. Globovision head Alberto Ravell told emboffs March 28 that the second in command of the Cuban embassy in Caracas was involved, and participated on the decision-making around the timing of both journalistsQ, releases. He speculated that Azocar's detention, the result of a local political squabble, presented the BRV with a convenient opportunity to take international opinion out for a test drive. Pacheco's detention one week after Azocar's imprisonment was almost certainly strategic and centrally-driven. Once the storm clouds began to gather, according to RCTV head Marcel Granier, Chavez himself ordered both Azocar and Pacheco released.

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Looking Forward to 2007?  
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14. (C) Media leaders viewed the recent arrests as a dry run for 2007 rather than as a viable election year strategy for the BRV. International opinion still matters, they pointed out, at least until after the December 2006 presidential elections. Besides, the BRV has an arsenal of economic and legal means with which to control the opposition press, and conditions are getting tougher, if anecdotal evidence is to be believed. The BRV's legal attacks on the opposition media have increased in recent months, and the economic picture is no better. RCTV's lawyers told emboffs that taxes are seven times as high as last year, while Globovision head Alberto Ravell said that his network was losing local partners and that many media outlets were liable for fines by Venezuelan broadcasting agency Conatel that would push them into the red if they were ever enforced. According to Venezuelan Press and Society Institute director Ewald Scharfenberg, the situation for the press is more difficult in the provinces than in Caracas. Many local chavista caudillos are taking advantage of the permissive atmosphere to settle accounts with their perceived press enemies in the provinces. Local media owner David Natera supported this point, claiming his Ciudad Guayana-based paper Correo del Caroni was a chavista target and that he'd had to chip in \$2 million of his own funds last year to keep the paper operational. All three media owners physically counted out the number of government ads in pro-government paper Ultimas Noticias without prompting, and Scharfenberg said the number of government ads in the paper ran at 25:100 in comparison with 1:100 for pro-opposition paper El Nacional. The BRV has any number of legal and economic mechanisms for controlling the press -- it has no need to resort to arrests in an election year.

CARACAS 00000911 003.2 OF 003

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COMMENT  
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15. (C) President Chavez has the Venezuelan media up against the wall. There are no domestic controls left to prevent him from pulling the trigger. The only remaining question is: how much will international opinion continue to matter to Chavez after he cements his power in presidential elections in December 2006? The recent arrests may have allowed the BRV to gauge the level of international attention it could expect, should it choose to throw international convention out the window in 2007.  
BROWNFIELD